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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the state of higher education in China, and was written by a U.S. scholar who attended a global population conference at East China Normal University in Shanghai (China). The focus of the meeting was on population and the environment. Although China's compulsory, government-controlled educational system bears similarity to the Russian system, higher education in China is changing in several directions. Distance education alternatives have been growing steadily and new programs are being put into place to increase access to education. As the Chinese government phases out full support of higher education for a majority of students, a new student loan program is seen as a way to reduce per capita government expenditure on higher education. China is slowly entering the technology age, and needs to upgrade its existing systems. Increasing access to both education and technology are key components of producing the workforce required by the modernization process. (Contains 13 references.) (Author/MAS)

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Directions for Higher Education in the People's Republic of China

by
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Abstract

Although China's compulsory educational system bears similarity to the Russian system, higher education is changing in several directions. Distance education alternatives have been growing steadily and new programs are being put into place to increase access to education, such as student loan programs. China is slowly entering the technology age and needs to upgrade its existing systems. Increasing access to both education and technology are key components of producing the workforce required by the modernization program.

Introduction

This paper is the result of my recent visit to the People's Republic of China at the invitation of their government. As a visiting scholar, I attended the Global population conference at East China Normal University in Shanghai which was co-sponsored by the Global Awareness Society International, China's Association of Social, Economic and Cultural Exchange, China's Research Association of Population and Environment, United Nations Fund of Population Activity, and the United Board of Christian Higher Education. The meeting's focus was population and the environment.

China's current situation is the adaptation of capitalist modes of operation within its socialist economic framework. The Chinese economy is growing at approximately 12 percent annually, with the rate of economic growth in Shanghai growing at about 21 percent. In this climate of rapid growth and change, China hopes to emerge as a world economic power. However, the large total population of 1.2 billion strains the nation's economy. In terms of natural resources, the China Population and Environment Society (1995) states that the per capita water and mineral resources, as well as the amount of arable land, are considered insufficient to support a population of this size.

China's government is attempting to raise the standard of living for its people. The four official "modernization" thrusts are agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology. In this era of the new open policy, education is a priority for modernization.

Higher Education

China's higher education system continues to be exclusive and under government control. Approximately thirty percent of the school-aged population selects an academic curriculum with the remainder going to vocational schools. Academic students take the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) and the

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highest scoring students have many options for higher education. Most students attend college/university under a competitive scholarship or grant from the government. After the 1989 student uprising, one year of political education is required prior to college. Popular majors are languages, business and the sciences. When students attend college under this arrangement, they are unable to change majors and they will owe the government six years of employment after graduation.

The concept of students paying their own fees to attend higher education is relatively new. The Chinese government appears to be phasing out full support of higher education for a majority of the students. With the exception of the brightest students, free higher education ended in 1985. Scholarship awards are based on merit, including moral and physical fitness. Recently, the government decided to require almost all students pay a portion of their tuition. In the future, the amount a student pays may be based on the popularity of the course (Hertling, 1995a).

As a result of economic expansion under the open system, student enrollments are no longer limited by state plans. From 1978 to 1987, enrollments in higher education increased from 865,000 to 2,064,000, and by 1992 the number had grown to 2,200,000. This reflects both the number of students being sponsored by work units in distance education classes or financing their own education.

Generally students who financed their own education were those with lower NCEE scores. As of 1989, only 11.9 percent of college/university students paid all of their own fees. Student loans are one of the capitalist ideas being adopted by the socialist system (Shouxin & Bray, 1992). Student loans are, therefore, also a new concept in China. A self-financed education more typically involves borrowing from family or friends rather than an institution.

China's new student loan program is seen as a way to reduce per capita government expenditure on higher education in an era of rapidly increasing needs fueled by staggering economic growth (Shouxin & Bray, 1992). In some cases, cancellations of loans are granted to high-achieving students or those who volunteer to teach in rural areas or areas with high minority populations. Overall, it's too soon to know if the student loan program in China will be successful or if a high number of students will default on their loan payments. In time of high inflation and low average income, it is hard to convince students to commit to this new concept of student loans.

There is currently an under supply of higher education in China. Educational expansion has placed a strain on the finances of many institutions. Enrollments in conventional universities have more than doubled between 1978 and 1988, increasing from 860,000 to 1,960,000 (Smith & Curran, 1989). Universities are engaging in business ventures and expanding popular courses of study. Some schools may merge to become more efficient. The government is challenged to produce a quality workforce capable of productivity required in their economic expansion, which will mean an emphasis on further development of both distance and higher education (Fu, 1991).

Workforce

China's primary need is to improve the quality of its workforce for the new technological and industrial jobs (Smith & Curran, 1989; Lee & Kim, 1991). Part of the growth in Shanghai, for example, is due to the anticipation of the 1997 return of Hong Kong. Corporate offices, such as Citibank and Bank of America, already have abandoned their Hong Kong offices and have relocated to Shanghai. In addition, the Pudong New Area of East Shanghai boasts a large corporate-industrial park which is currently under construction.

A cohort exists of workers who had their education interrupted by the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). This may have contributed to the present over supply of rural farm workers and shortage of qualified classroom teachers for the public schools. The illiteracy rate of males in China is 13 percent and females is 32 percent (The Europa World Yearbook, 1994). Although the average worker may have basic literacy skills, many will find themselves functionally illiterate as they realize the skills required for jobs in the new corporate-industrial realm.

Much of the Chinese public education system that evolved in the 1950's was modeled after the Russian system (Chen, 1994). The main teaching method is the transmission mode (lecture) with students mastering well-specified material. There currently are nine years of compulsory education in China, but this system does not prepare the students for modernization. Compulsory education is still being phased in, and the goal was to have 95 percent of the country participating by 1995.

Women are seen as very important to the overall picture. A well educated woman contributes not only to her family's standard of living, but also to society as a whole. The government's official policy is to promote late marriage and childbearing. In general, it is not acceptable for a woman to stay home and raise her child. Everyone is expected to work and child care is often provided by the grandmother.

Recent statements in the official China Daily (May 26, 1995) newspaper have announced an emphasis on science and technology education to improve the quality of the workforce. Science and Education are emphasized in official statements as important to maintain economic growth and achieve national prosperity.

A concern of China is the "Brain drain" (Broaded, 1993) when the brightest and best educated citizens leave China for opportunities in other countries. Most students who study abroad attempt to extend their stays indefinitely. The most popular countries for Chinese students are Australia, Canada, and the United States. In 1989, the single most numerous group of international students in the United States was from the People's Republic of China. These numbers reflect the emphasis on modernization and improving the workforce. The government realizes that if these scholars are to return to China, they must face conditions and opportunities that are attractive.

Technology

China is on the brink of a technological revolution. With recent official announcements emphasizing science and technology education, there are many gaps in the availability of technology. China has a relatively low number of computers for its total population in addition to an inadequate communications infrastructure.

While many families are reported to own a 486 computer, most college students do not own a computer and campus facilities are limited. Typically, a university library may have a computerized catalogue system, as well as several computer labs for students to use. Computer assisted instruction (CAI) has many advocates with CAI being seen as a way to deliver instruction efficiently (Pengwei, 1995), but presently there is little CAI. Faculty at ten major universities are presently able to use the Internet; a Chinese version is called CERNET based at Qinghua University, and faculty commonly share terminals and passwords (Hertling, 1995b). Also, the May 25, 1995 China Daily announced (p. 11) that the Data Communication Bureau Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications was encouraging applications to China Net, the nation-wide Internet backbone, for connection to information resources.

The official policy is to bring China into the technological age. The official application process allows the government to monitor China Net activities. However, Internet connections and wireless technology are also used by subversive groups. For example, "beepers" and cell phones are common and affordable by the average person, and very prevalent in China's major cities. The hope is to curb the brain drain with improved technology and communications among scholars.

Distance Education

China considers itself a leader in distance education technology for higher education. China's Radio and TV University began in 1976 at the end of the Cultural Revolution to meet the needs of adult education and to produce the large number of trained workers required by society (Smith & Curran, 1989). TV University has been very cost effective and reaches learners who are outside the regions of the traditional urban-based universities.

TV and Radio Universities are organized at all levels of government, from the Central Radio and TV University (CRTVU) in Beijing to the provincial TV Universities, and finally industry-oriented or "workstation" radio and TV classes. The past decades have seen enrollments increase dramatically. Figures from 1979 to 1986 show that Lianoning province's TV University had an average enrollment of more than 17,000 annually (Smith & Curran, 1989). The CRTVU is the most prestigious and emphasizes the large-scale societal needs and national specialties. Workstation students attend TV or radio classes with about 40 students in a room and watch instructional programs (or listen to radio broadcasts). Each class has a tutor who manages the class, has certain administrative functions, and communicates with the students' work units. Many of the programs are direct

university classes and major cities often have course offerings on two channels. There is also a China TV Normal University devoted to teacher training since teachers are one group required to return for professional continuing education.

Most courses are considered multi-media with the print materials and/or audio cassettes available at local "New China" bookstores. Popular courses of study are engineering and law. Today almost all regular institutions of higher learning have a correspondence division. Additionally, there are four independent correspondence colleges which had a total of 33,266 students in 1987. Self-study exams are state issued to those who have accumulated a certain number of credits from various distance modes and/or resident courses. Radio and TV Universities are cost effective. With the tradition of high amounts of government-supported education, distance education helps keep expenses low. Cost comparisons from 1985 show that even a university that is government run cost 1643 yuan per student per year, while the distance education alternative cost 577 yuan per student per year (Smith & Curran, 1989).

The average distance learner is age 30, with a range from 18 to 50, and is an "in-service" worker. These are workers who are employed and need to upgrade their skills or earn degrees to be promoted. In the more academically-oriented programs, students, who are called "all subject" learners, are given six years to complete a college degree. A large proportion of the TV university graduates become engineers and technicians which are much needed in the workforce. Other significant proportions of TV university graduates become teachers which also are welcome by society.

Directions

Success of the four "modernizations" in new China relies on its ability to produce a new class of skilled and educated workers. The primary need is to train workers for the corporate-industrial job market which is rapidly expanding due to, for example, the abandonment of Hong Kong and the influx of business into Shanghai. The situation in Shanghai is only one example of the need that will dominate many segments of education in China for years to come. China has entered an era of unprecedented educational need compounded by a need to maintain central control. The main goal is to produce workers who are "dedicated to the socialist course and the nation's social progress" (Smith & Curran, p. 97).

The new student loan program and the strong history of distance education are both viable strategies for lowering the government expenditure per student while providing education for large numbers of people. As China expands its educational technology, its main hopes are to improve communication among scholars and researchers, improve computing facilities in higher education, and facilitate higher education and economic development. The political impact of increased access to the Internet is yet unknown.

Research and evaluation units have been established within the radio and television university organization (Smith & Curran, 1989). These units will track success of learners and determine distance education course models for the future.

China's investment in radio, TV and print media will prove invaluable as it expands and refines its present distance education efforts. More distance education will be needed to meet the needs of the growing population of adult learners. A primary need is to upgrade the communications infrastructure and increase access to technology. Simultaneously, distance educators must investigate computer delivery systems including CAI for stand-alone systems and wide-area networks designed to allow interaction between learners and universities.

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